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Enrolment at primary level: gender difference disappears in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the recent past, there have been a number of new initiatives to improve the access to primary education in many developing countries. Such initiatives, which came from the public, private and non-governmental (NGO) sectors, have resulted in improved performance in various efficiency indicators. This paper reports results from a nationwide study in Bangladesh on the levels and changes in enrolment pattern of children at the primary level. The gross enrolment ratio has reached 107% and the net enrolment rate 77%. Gender gap has disappeared; in fact girls have surpassed boys! However, the increase in enrolment taking place is not at the desired speed; it is less than one percentage point per year. The government is still the major provider of primary education with two-thirds of all enrolments, but non-formal schools run by NGOs also have important contributions to the positive changes that are taking place in Bangladesh. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The experience of the past decades has unequivocally proved the inadequacy of the development paradigms popularised in the developing world since the end of the Second World War. Building physical infrastructure and financial capital, though important, are not enough to break the cycle of poverty. There is little doubt now that human capital formation is the sine qua non for a

sustainable improvement in the lives of the people (Sen, 1999).

Emphasis on education, particularly primary and basic education, is the order of the day in global development planning. Yet, there are 872 million adult illiterates or one in every three, and 125 million children of primary school age are out of school in the world (Oxfam, 1999). During the present decade three major conferences attended by world leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the goal of primary education.

The World Conference on Education for All (EFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990 was a landmark in reaffirming the participating nations' commitment to the cause of basic education. As a direct consequence, many initiatives

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to promote basic education have been launched in different parts of the world. In the Asia Pacific region, for example, UNESCO, as the co-ordinating body, drew up a plan of action to implement the World Declaration on EFA (WCEFA, 1990). Several member countries have also drawn up their own plans of action. In Bangladesh an increased commitment of the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and donors to primary education has been seen over the past several years. The recent National Plan of Action for Children 1997–2002 has summarised the positive development that has taken place in primary education in recent times in the following (PMED, 1995):

- (a) The National Programme of Action gave high priority to improving basic and primary level education.
- (b) Girls' education has been given priority.
- (c) Establishment of a separate Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) facilitated better attention to primary education.
- (d) A National Children Policy (NCP) was enunciated in 1994 in line with the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) goals.

Some of the major educational goals of NCP which have been implemented already include:

- (i) Free and compulsory primary education for all children.
- (ii) Free education for girls up to grade VIII; scholarships to all girls attending secondary schools in rural areas and incentives to the schools to encourage this as well.
- (iii) A food-for-education programme for poorer children.
- (iv) Provision of appropriate facilities by NGOs for non-formal education for children deprived of formal schooling.

Bangladesh is a signatory to the World Declaration on EFA. In the past, conventional strategies and traditional methods in universalising primary education have been tried, but without the desired

result. Over a period of 15 years between 1980 and 1995, the literacy rate in adults rose marginally from 32 to 38%; the rate for females remains at only about half of that for males. Contrary to these figures which are provided by some international organisations, official statistics give a more optimistic picture. According to the government, the literacy rate has now reached 56%, which, however, remains to be independently validated. The government has set the goal to attain an adult literacy rate of 62% by the year 2000 and claims that five of the 64 districts have been freed of illiteracy (The Daily Star, 1999).

The improvement in literacy rate has also been experienced in many other developing countries. For example, the literacy rate for adult females in Nepal increased by 104% over a period of 12 years between 1985 and 1997; the same figure for India and Pakistan being 34 and 51, respectively (UNDP, 1999). The worldwide gain in education is also reflected in enrolment rates. Population Action International (1998) has compared gross enrolment ratios for almost all the countries of the world during 1985 and 1995 and found that with the exception of some African and Middle Eastern Arab countries, the gross enrolment ratio has increased in most developing countries.

Bangladesh has also done well in recent years in increasing the enrolment at primary levels, particularly for girls. Over the period 1980–95, the net enrolment, as reported by UNICEF and the World Bank, has increased from 62 to 79%; the girls' enrolment rate in the same period increased much faster from a base of 47 to 73% (Table 1).

Table 1
Primary enrolment rate in Bangladesh, 1980–95*

Year	Primary enrolment		
	Boys	Girls	Total
1980	76	47	62
1985	67	55	61
1990	76	64	70
1995	84	73	79

* Sources: State of the World's Children, UNICEF (various reports), World Development Report, The World Bank (various reports).

This paper presents recent data on trends in enrolment at primary level in Bangladesh and its distribution for various geographic, religious, socio-economic, ethnic and gender groups.

2. Methodology

The data for this analysis come from the *Education Watch* project which is a joint effort of various civil society organizations and individuals concerned with the state of primary education in Bangladesh. The purpose of the *Watch* is to monitor primary education in the country and to act as an advocacy group. The *Watch* has its secretariat at Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a supra-body of over 400 NGOs in Bangladesh and is being implemented by the Research and Evaluation Division of BRAC, a large NGO itself. The school year in Bangladesh starts in January and the field data were collected in October–November 1998, just before the annual examinations.

The country was divided into eight strata and independent samples were drawn from each based on random multi-stage techniques. The strata included the rural areas of six administrative divisions separately (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet), four metropolitan cities (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna), and other urban settlements (other than the above metropolitan cities). A total of 42,584 households from 312 villages or urban *mahallas* representing all 64 districts were surveyed.

Bangladesh has a 5-year primary cycle and the official primary school age is 6–10 years. Since previous knowledge suggested that children outside of this age group also are enrolled in various types of institutions providing primary and basic education, the survey collected enrolment information from children aged 4–20 years residing in the selected households. Net and gross ratios were computed based on the official primary age group. More details of the methodology are available elsewhere (Chowdhury et al., 1999a).

3. Results

3.1. Gross enrolment

Table 2 shows the gross enrolment ratios at primary level (grades I–V). It includes enrolment in all types of primary schools: secular and non-secular, formal and non-formal. The table shows that the gross enrolment exceeded 100% in almost all strata and for both girls and boys. The gross enrolment nationally is 107; girls having a higher ratio of 109% compared to boys (104%). Division-wise, rural Khulna has the highest ratio of 117%, and the metropolitan cities have the lowest of 101%; in both cases the ratios for girls exceeded those of boys. In fact, girls were ahead of boys everywhere except rural Chittagong where boys were marginally ahead. The table also shows that the metropolitan areas were worse off than other urban areas.

Fig. 1 shows the gross enrolment at the national level by grade enrolled. It shows several things. Firstly, the enrolment decreases progressively at every higher grade. Secondly, the drop is highest between grades I and II, and between grades III and IV. Thirdly, there is little difference between boys and girls in the way the attrition takes place. Fourthly, the load of students was highest in earlier grades which may be a reflection of increased enrolment at the lowest grades or higher subsequent dropout or both. Ideally, one-fifth of all students should have been in each grade, but a third of all students were in grade I alone.

Fig. 2 shows the proportion of children enrolled at primary level by age. Since the primary age is 6–10 years, the figure shows that 33% or a third of the enrolled students were from outside the primary age group; 27% were over-aged.

Table 3 shows the gross enrolment for different types of primary institutions. Of the students enrolled at primary level, the government-run schools had the highest number with two-thirds of all students enrolled in such schools. It should be remembered that the government schools also have the highest capacity. Second in enrolment were the non-government (registered) schools with 12% of all students. The NGOs, which run non-formal schools in most cases, were the third with 8.5% of enrolment. The *Madrassas*, which provide edu-

Table 2
Gross enrolment ratio at primary level (grades I–V) by stratum and sex^a

Stratum	Gross enrolment ratio (%)		
	Girls	Boys	Both
Rural Dhaka Division	112 (1829)	101 (1951)	106 (3780)
Rural Chittagong Division	104 (2397)	105 (2555)	104 (4952)
Rural Rajshahi Division	113 (1663)	105 (1732)	109 (3395)
Rural Khulna Division	121 (1923)	113 (2006)	117 (3929)
Rural Barisal Division	108 (1993)	106 (2041)	107 (4034)
Rural Sylhet Division	107 (2185)	104 (2300)	105 (4485)
Metropolitan cities	103 (1601)	99 (1657)	101 (3258)
Other urban areas	111 (1626)	106 (1633)	108 (3259)
Rural Bangladesh	111 (11,990)	105 (12,585)	108 (24,575)
Urban Bangladesh	107 (3227)	103 (3290)	105 (6517)
All Bangladesh	109 (15,217)	104 (15,875)	107 (31,092)

^a Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6–10 years.

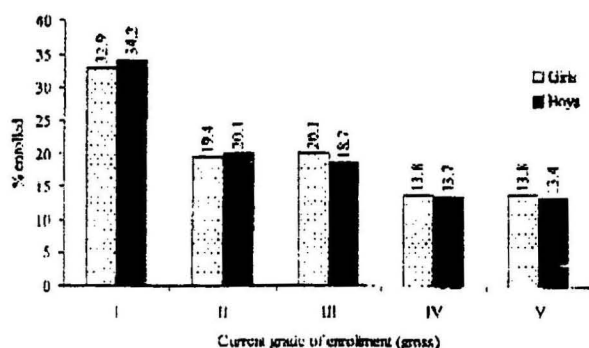


Fig. 1. Percentage distribution of enrolled children by grade and sex.

cation with Islamic focus, had 6% of students; of these *Ebtadayee*, which is equivalent to the primary level, had a 1.3% share. Others such as non-government (unregistered), English-medium *kindergartens* and the primary schools attached to secondary schools were much less significant. A further look at the share of different NGOs in non-formal enrolment showed that 76% of such students attended the schools run by BRAC.¹

¹ BRAC is a local NGO with its development programmes spread over more than half of Bangladesh's 86,000 villages. It is one of the largest NGOs in the country with 26,000 full-time and 32,000 part-time functionaries (Lovell, 1993; Ahmed et al., 1993; Chowdhury and Cash, 1996).

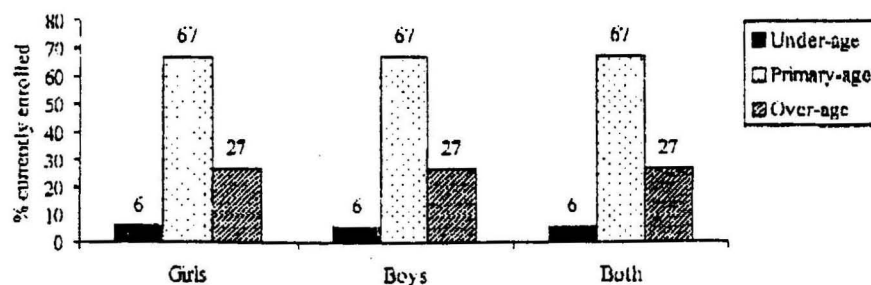


Fig. 2. Percentage of currently enrolled children who were under-age, primary age and over-age, by sex.

Table 3
Percentage distribution of children currently enrolled at primary level (grades I–V) by type of school, residence and sex

Type of school	Rural Bangladesh			Urban Bangladesh			All Bangladesh		
	Girls (13,177)*	Boys (13,246)	Both (26,423)	Girls (3439)	Boys (3367)	Both (6806)	Girls (16,616)	Boys (16,613)	Both (33,229)
Primary school									
Government	68.9	69.2	69.1	57.7	55.5	56.6	67.6	67.6	67.6
Non-government (reg.)	12.9	12.7	12.8	7.2	6.5	6.9	12.3	12.0	12.1
Non-government (unreg.)	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.0	2.8	2.4	2.8	2.9	2.8
Non-formal primary	10.0	6.6	8.3	9.0	10.4	11.7	10.2	6.8	8.5
Madrassa									
Ebtedayee	1.0	1.5	1.3	2.5	1.9	1.3	1.0	1.6	1.3
Kamil/Fazel/Alim/Dakhil	2.4	4.2	3.3	3.5	2.8	2.2	2.4	4.1	3.2
Hafezia/Kaomi/Kharezee	1.0	2.0	1.5	1.7	1.1	0.5	0.9	1.9	1.4
Kindergarten	0.5	0.7	0.6	8.8	7.7	6.7	1.2	1.6	1.4
Secondary attached	0.4	0.3	0.3	9.6	10.2	10.7	1.6	1.3	1.5
All types	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

* Figures within parentheses indicate number of children currently enrolled at primary level.

There were some variations between urban and rural areas in terms of enrolment and school type. While the government and non-government (registered) sub-systems had higher than the average shares of enrolment in rural areas, others such as NGOs, *madrassas*, English-medium, and secondary-attached primary schools had higher shares in urban areas. The difference between girls and boys was more prominent for *madrassas* and NGO schools. While there were more girls than boys in NGO schools it was the reverse in the case of *madrassas*.

3.2. Net enrolment

Table 4 shows the net enrolment at primary level in Bangladesh. Nationally, the net enrolment rate was found to be 77%, which means that 23% of the primary school age children (6–10 years) were not enrolled at all. The difference between girls and boys as found in gross ratios was maintained here as well with the girls being significantly more enrolled than boys ($p < 0.001$). Such a difference between girls and boys persisted for several strata including rural Bangladesh, Barisal, Khulna and Dhaka divisions. An important difference between

the gross and net rates emerges when one compares the urban–rural difference. While rural areas did better in gross rate, this was reversed in net rate; this probably implies that urban schools are more stringent in terms of the age of the pupil on admission or urban parents are more conscious about sending their children to school at the appropriate age, or both. The urban advantage in net rates was restricted in the case of boys only. The net rates varied significantly among different divisions with Khulna being the highest (82.6%) and Chittagong the lowest (74%).

3.3. Net enrolment and socio-economic differentials

Tables 5 and 6 confirm again the importance of the socio-economic background of parents in enrolment. Parents were asked to identify their economic status in one of the four categories: 'always in deficit', 'sometimes in deficit', 'balanced', or 'surplus'. For those parents who reported to have a 'surplus' status in economic terms, the net enrolment was 88%, but this was only 66.3% for those who reported to be in an 'always deficit' situation. Table 5 reveals that the advantage of

Table 4
Net enrolment rate (%) among children 6–10 years by stratum and sex^a

Stratum	Net enrolment rate (%)						Significance
	Girls		Boys		Both		
Rural Dhaka Division	79.2	(1829)	71.7	(1951)	75.3	(3780)	$p < 0.001$
Rural Chittagong Division	73.8	(2397)	74.2	(2555)	74.0	(4952)	ns
Rural Rajshahi Division	78.0	(1663)	75.8	(1732)	76.9	(3395)	ns
Rural Khulna Division	85.8	(1923)	79.5	(2006)	82.6	(3929)	$p < 0.001$
Rural Barisal Division	82.0	(1993)	78.2	(2041)	80.1	(4034)	$p < 0.01$
Rural Sylhet Division	78.8	(2185)	77.6	(2300)	78.2	(4485)	ns
Metropolitan cities	76.1	(1601)	77.9	(1657)	77.1	(3258)	ns
Other urban areas	80.8	(1626)	80.9	(1633)	80.8	(3259)	ns
Significance	$p < 0.001$		$p < 0.001$		$p < 0.001$		
Rural Bangladesh	78.7	(11,990)	75.0	(12,585)	76.8	(24,575)	$p < 0.001$
Urban Bangladesh	78.5	(3227)	79.4	(3290)	79.0	(6517)	ns
Significance	ns		$p < 0.001$		$p < 0.05$		
All Bangladesh	78.6	(15,217)	75.5	(15,875)	77.1	(31,092)	$p < 0.001$

^a Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6–10 years; ns=not significant at $p=0.05$.

Table 5
Net enrolment rate (%) among children 6–10 years by residence, self-perceived economic status and sex^a

Residence	Self-perceived economic status								Significance
	Always in deficit		Sometimes in deficit		Balanced		Surplus		
Rural Bangladesh									
Girls	69.1	(4121)	80.4	(4320)	86.0	(2582)	88.7	(967)	$p < 0.001$
Boys	64.0	(4445)	77.4	(4378)	82.8	(2748)	87.8	(1013)	$p < 0.001$
Both	66.5	(8566)	78.9	(8698)	84.4	(5330)	88.3	(1980)	$p < 0.001$
Level of significance	$p < 0.001$		$p < 0.001$		$p < 0.01$		ns		
Urban Bangladesh									
Girls	67.1	(744)	80.0	(920)	83.6	(1045)	81.8	(518)	$p < 0.001$
Boys	63.5	(781)	79.4	(938)	85.1	(1081)	92.2	(490)	$p < 0.001$
Both	65.2	(1525)	79.7	(1858)	84.4	(2126)	86.9	(1008)	$p < 0.001$
Level of significance	ns		ns		ns		$p < 0.001$		
All Bangladesh									
Girls	68.9	(4865)	80.4	(5240)	85.6	(3627)	87.3	(1485)	$p < 0.001$
Boys	64.0	(5226)	77.6	(5316)	83.2	(3829)	88.7	(1503)	$p < 0.001$
Both	66.3	(10,092)	79.0	(10,556)	84.4	(7456)	88.0	(2988)	$p < 0.001$
Level of significance	$p < 0.001$		$p < 0.001$		ns		$p < 0.05$		

^a Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6–10 years; ns=not significant at $p=0.05$.

Table 6
Net enrolment rate (%) among children 6–10 years by mother's level of education, sex and residence^a

Residence	Mother's level of education			Significance
	None	Primary	Secondary+	
Rural Bangladesh				
Girls	73.3 (7936)	89.8 (2779)	95.5 (1056)	$p < 0.001$
Boys	68.9 (8405)	87.8 (2932)	94.3 (1028)	$p < 0.001$
Both	71.0 (16,341)	88.8 (5711)	94.9 (2084)	$p < 0.001$
Level of significance	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.01$	ns	
Urban Bangladesh				
Girls	67.6 (1548)	87.3 (710)	94.2 (879)	$p < 0.001$
Boys	68.2 (1586)	88.4 (670)	93.4 (961)	$p < 0.001$
Both	67.9 (3134)	87.8 (1380)	93.8 (1840)	$p < 0.001$
Level of significance	ns	ns	ns	
All Bangladesh				
Girls	72.7 (9484)	89.5 (3489)	95.1 (1935)	$p < 0.001$
Boys	68.9 (9991)	87.9 (3602)	94.0 (1989)	$p < 0.001$
Both	70.8 (19,475)	88.7 (7091)	94.5 (3924)	$p < 0.001$
Level of significance	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.05$	ns	

^a Figures within parentheses indicate number of children aged 6–10 years; ns—not significant at $p=0.05$.

girls over boys in enrolment is present more in poorer groups than in the richer groups, particularly in rural areas. In urban areas, however, boys' enrolment in the better-off families was significantly higher than that of girls.

Mothers' educational level continued to influence enrolment. Mothers with secondary or more education had more of their children enrolled than mothers with no or little education ($p < 0.001$). The tendency to send girls more than boys to school persisted for mothers with no schooling themselves, but for mothers with higher education there was no such difference.

In terms of religious background, Muslims had a significantly higher (77.6%) enrolment rate than non-Muslims (71.2%). This was true for all strata except Dhaka and Barisal divisions and the metropolitan areas, where the trend was the reverse. The involvement of a household member with NGO activities increased the net enrolment significantly in poorer households; this was more so in metropolitan areas (not shown in table).

3.4. The non-enrolled

Table 4 shows that 23% of children aged 6–10 years were not enrolled in any schools at the time of the survey. An analysis of such children revealed that they came from socially disadvantaged classes: 86% of their mothers and 78% of their fathers had no education (compared to 64% among those enrolled) and 79% were 'poor' (compared to 66% among those enrolled).

Reasons for non-enrolment were also explored. The most important reasons mentioned were 'too young to go to school' (36.9%), 'lack of money' (31.6%) and 'the child does not like school' (12%).

3.5. Trends in enrolment

From each individual aged 4–20 years, we collected her/his schooling history. This information was also collected in 1993 from children aged 11–12 years in the national survey for the Assessment of Basic Competencies (ABC) (Nath et al., 1993).

Table 7

Percentage distribution of children currently enrolled, dropout and never enrolled, 1998 and 1993*

	Girls			Boys			Total		
	CE	DO	NE	CE	DO	NE	CE	DO	NE
Children 16–20 years (1998)	28.6 (n=8366)	45.2	26.2	37.8 (n=8605)	40.0	22.2	33.3 (n=16,971)	42.6	24.1
Children 11–12 years (1998)	83.7 (n=5853)	7.0	9.3	77.6 (n=5731)	10.7	11.7	80.7 (n=11,584)	8.8	10.5
Children 11–12 years (1993)	73.7 (n=1275)	10.8	15.5	79.8 (n=1245)	8.3	11.9	76.7 (n=2520)	9.6	13.7

* CE=current enrolled; DO=dropped out; NE=never enrolled.

Table 7 shows the proportion of children who were reported 'currently enrolled' or 'never enrolled' during the 1998 and 1993 surveys. This information is given for two groups of children: those aged 11–12 years in both the surveys and those aged 16–20 years in the 1998 survey. This is a snapshot of children but it provides valuable information on trends. There has been an increase in the proportion currently enrolled for children aged 11–12 years between 1993 and 1998 (Fig. 3). However, this increase was restricted to girls whose proportion increased by 10 percentage points from 73.7 to 83.7%; the boys actually registered a small decline from 79.8 to 77.6%. Similarly, the proportion who dropped out decreased for girls but increased for boys. Also the proportion of children reportedly never enrolled decreased for girls but remained almost the same for boys.

Individuals who were 16–20 years old at the time of the survey had passed their primary schooling age. Schooling information for this group of children is a crude reflection of the situation persisting approximately 5–10 years ago. About a quarter of such children never attended school. For children aged 11–12 years surveyed in 1998, this proportion was much less (10.5%). By the time this cohort reaches the age of 16–20 years, this proportion will further be reduced since many of them will get opportunities in schools run for adolescents by the government and NGOs.

3.6. Enrolment outside primary classes

Fig. 4 shows the enrolment status of all individuals aged 6–20 years in three age groups: 6–10 (primary), 11–15 (secondary) and 16–20 (post-

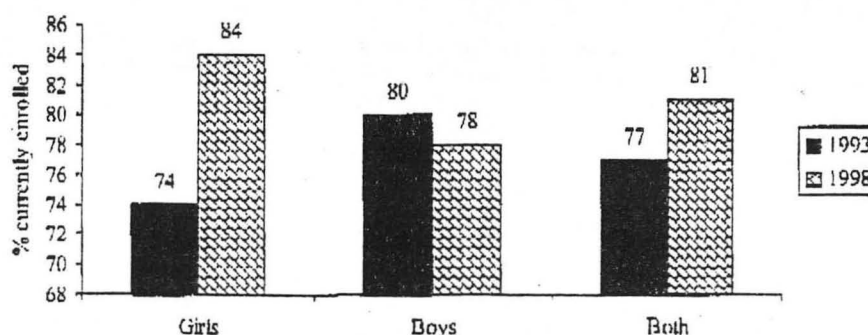


Fig. 3. Percentage of children 11–12 years old currently enrolled in school, 1993 and 1998.

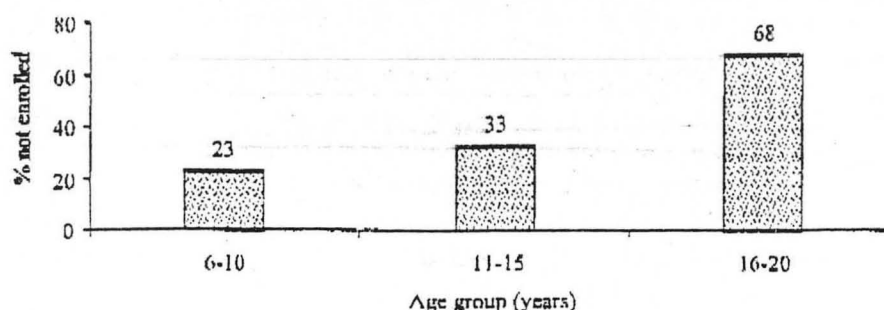


Fig. 4. Percentage of children not enrolled among children 6–20 years old.

secondary). It shows that the proportion not enrolled increased with age: 23% in 6–10, 33% in 11–15, and 68% in 16–20 age group.

The values in bold type in Table 8 are of particular interest. These are the 'real' net enrolment rates at different levels of schooling. For example, the 'real' net enrolment was 73% at primary stage, 32% at secondary stage and 13% at post-secondary level. The drop in enrolment between primary and secondary stage (and post-secondary) is startling.

4. Discussion

This study has documented improvements in access to primary education in Bangladesh in terms of enrolment. The gross enrolment ratio, which shows the number of children enrolled at primary level per 100 children of primary school age, has reached 107%. This is more than is suggested by

the latest government figures. Independent estimates by UNICEF found the rate to be 111% (UNICEF, 1999) but the 'Bangladesh Education Sector Strategy Note', prepared for the April 1999 Paris Development Forum, quoted a gross enrolment ratio of 90–95% (LCG Sub-group for Education, 1999). The National Plan of Action set a target of 95% of gross enrolment for the year 2000; our information suggests that this was already achieved when the plan was formulated in 1995. Since the difference between gross ratio and net rates is in excess of 20 percentage points for most South Asian countries (this study found it to be 30), the government should set the target in terms of net rates, not gross ratio. Adherence to the gross ratio gives an upwardly biased impression about the actual situation which may result in complacency.

The primary schools run by the government remains dominant with two-thirds of all enrolments. The government had nationalised all primary schools in 1973 but started allowing new schools in the private sector in the early 1980s. The registered and non-registered privately managed schools, which now enrol about 15% of primary school-going children, are increasingly playing important roles. The third highest in relative enrolment are the schools run by NGOs. Most of these are non-formal in nature but cater to the learning goals as enunciated by the government (Ghosh, 1999). The NGO schools enrol 8.5% of primary school going children which has increased nearly four-fold in less than 10 years. Children going to other types are small: 1.5% in *Ebriedayee*

Table 8

'Real' net enrolment rates at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels for individuals aged 6–20 years

Age (years)	Currently enrolled in grade (%)			
	I–V	VI–X	XI+	n
6–10	72.6	0.5	—	31,092
11–15	34.0	32.5	0.2	26,597
16–20	0.9	17.5	13.5	17,232

madrassa, 1.4% in English medium kindergartens, and 1.5% in primary schools attached to secondary schools.

Children of various age groups go to primary level institutions. The official primary school age is 6–10 years, but one-third of all children enrolled in primary level institutions were beyond this age group. This leads the discussion to net enrolment rate which is the proportion of children aged 6–10 years attending schools. To many this is a preferred indicator for enrolment. Seventy-seven percent of children at primary school age were enrolled in different institutions, which is an improvement over the last few years. Both gross and net rates have increased over the past few years, which is indicative of the system's capability to improve. In fact, the gross ratios have surpassed what was targeted for the year 2000 by the government (PMED, 1995). The target is, however, much lower than the World Declaration standards.

The improvement in enrolment rates is also confirmed by other analyses made in the text. A study carried out in 1993 found 77% enrolment among children aged 11–12 years, while the corresponding figure was 81% for the same age group in 1998. It took 5 years for enrolment in this age group to reach 81% — less than one percentage point per year. If we move at this pace it will take 29 years for all our children to gain access to primary school! We need to devise ways through which we can move faster.

One of the reasons mentioned by parents for not sending children to school was that the child was 'too young'. This is because of a lack of awareness about the child's age and the age at which a child should be sent to school. The absence of the registration of births and the consequent unavailability of an updated list of the population at different ages are partially responsible for this. Registration of births does have other important uses such as in immunization, and thus should be effectively introduced (Chowdhury et al., 1999b). The other reasons for not sending children to school were related to poverty and the attractiveness of the school environment. While poverty is identified as a major reason worldwide (World Bank, 1997), examples show that if the education system is made more flexible to cater for the strategic needs

of the poor parents, they do send their children to school. The schools run by NGOs in Bangladesh have been successful in recruiting and retaining poorer students in their schools (Ahmed et al., 1993). In fact, the increase in total enrolment and reversal of gender gap have much to do with the proliferation of NGO schools. In the absence of NGO schools, the gross rate would have been 98 for girls and 97 for boys instead of the present 109 and 104, respectively. The country seems to have gained much by creating a space for NGOs, and this can be multiplied with further support, as mentioned above.

The issue of equity involves several disadvantaged groups and studies have reported poor educational achievement for girls, the poor, ethnic minorities, and street and working children (Brock and Cammish, 1999; Chowdhury et al., 1992; Alam et al., 1997). The country has made spectacular progress in reducing the gender gap in enrolment which has in fact disappeared. This is a feat which no other country in South Asia has been able to achieve! This spectacular accomplishment can be traced to a number of 'positive discriminatory' actions that the state and NGOs have initiated. A most important contribution to this is the scholarships that the State provides to girls attending secondary schools. As of June 1999, the government provided Tk 4.8 billion (US\$1= Tk 50) to 7.8 million girls (The Daily Star, 1999). The schools also simultaneously receive a small contribution from the state for every girl enrolled, which provides incentive for improved performance. The food-for-education programme that the government initiated provides a food ration to about 12% of children from rural poorer families for attending school. In addition, some of the NGOs also have large non-formal schools which target girls from poorer families. An example of positive discrimination in favour of girls is the BRAC Non-Formal Primary Education programme which ensures that 70% of its 1.2 million pupils are girls and that they are from poorer families (Ahmed et al., 1993). Such positive discriminatory steps have had a direct impact. A comparison of the background profile of children attending schools in 1993 and 1998 shows that more girls and an increased proportion of children from socio-economically disad-

vantaged groups are now attending school. It is not only in enrolment that the girls have caught up with boys, the girls also have achieved equality in completion rates at the primary cycle, with their dropout rate equal or lower than that of boys.

Another interesting fact is the excess female enrolments that have been reported in specific groups: rural areas, poorer families, and among those whose mothers never attended schools. This is a welcome shift. Such an increase in female enrolment is being experienced in many developing countries. Table 9 shows the gender gap in 1995 compared to 1985 for five South Asian countries and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Except for Pakistan, the gender gap decreased in all these countries including Iran (Population Action International, 1998).

The design of this study did not allow separate analysis for children belonging to ethnic groups or urban slums. It is, however, well acknowledged that the street children are amongst the most disadvantaged in the society. There are a few programmes that address the particular needs of such children such as the 'Hard-to-reach' schools implemented by NGOs with State and UNICEF support. However, this is overshadowed by the reported failure to keep the children continuing through the primary cycle. This probably demands more imaginative ideas and programmes.

The situation in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) (Minority Rights Groups, 1997) where most of

Bangladesh's ethnic minorities live has been an unknown territory for over two decades. Very little was known about the educational situation in the three districts that constitute the CHT. In mid-1998, following a peace agreement between the *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity* and the Government of Bangladesh, BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division carried out a large socioeconomic survey of five of the CHT's 11 major ethnic groups. Education was one of the foci of this investigation. Substantial differences among the groups in terms of literacy, enrolment, and achievement were reported. It was observed that all the groups were lagging behind the dominant Bangalees, that girls were behind boys in each group and that some of the ethnic groups such as Mro and Tripura were far behind the more numerous Chakmas. Now that peace has been restored, pragmatic planning with participation of all is essential for equitable development of all ethnic groups. A contentious issue in this task will be the use of the mother tongue. Some of the groups such as Chakmas and Marmas have their own alphabets, but these are fast becoming extinct for various reasons. Revival and their use at least at the primary level will help children in such groups learn faster. It is well known that the use of any language other than the mother tongue at the instruction level perpetuates inequalities (Bunyi, 1999).

Another issue which was raised from this paper is the fast drop in enrolment between pri-

Table 9
Gender gap at primary level enrolment in selected South Asian countries and Iran, 1985 vs 1995*

Country	Gross enrolment ratio (1995)		Gender gap		
	Girls	Boys	1995	1985	Increase/decrease
Pakistan	45	101	56	26	+30
Nepal	80	129	40	58	-18
India	90	110	20	30	-10
Bangladesh	73	84	11	19	-8
Sri Lanka	112	114	2	3	-1
Iran	96	103	7	21	-14

* Source: Population Action International (1998).

mary and secondary and between secondary and higher secondary levels. While the 'real' net enrolment rate was found to be 73% at the primary level, it is only 13% at the higher secondary level. The reasons for this are numerous, but an important one is the absence of the required emphasis on post-primary levels by the government and NGO sectors alike. While many NGOs are active in the primary sector, not a single NGO is found in secondary or higher secondary levels.

Years of neglect have created a stagnating situation in the education sector in Bangladesh. Because of recent affirmation by the national government along with support from the international community and NGOs, the situation has started to improve. However, the improvements are not taking place at the desired speed. More dynamism and increased participation of the stakeholders will speed up the process of universalising primary education in Bangladesh. An important element that must be considered simultaneously with this crusade is the quality of education. Although this was not the focus of this paper, the country faces more daunting challenges in ensuring quality education to its children (Chowdhury et al., 1999a).

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